IDENTIFYING AT-RISK YOUTH: STRATEGIES TO HELP THEM SUCCEED

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ABSTRACT

Approximately 30-40% of Canadian children are deemed to be at risk of not completing high school and 1.2 million or 27.6% of Canadian children under the age of 11 can be considered vulnerable to emotional, behavioural, social, or academic problems. Through the use of unobtrusive research under a qualitative research paradigm, a democratic approach to education focusing on empowering members of the teaching community and students has been done. This research narrows the gap between traditional education practices and explores new ways of instruction in order to create a healthy learning environment where students are able to feel excited and empowered through their learning. This manual encourages educators to try, adapt, and adopt new methodologies in their teaching repertoire. Intervention strategies include physical literacy, adventure-based learning, strengths-based approach, and social justice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Education is the primary factor that enables people to lead healthy, fulfilling lives. It plays a role in the healthy development of individuals by providing them with tools and skills to become productive members of society. When youth feel connected to school, they are more likely to report better health, above average marks, and engage in fewer risky activities than youth who feel less connected (Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Smith, Peled, Albert, MacKay, Stewart, Saewyc, & the McCreary Center Society, 2007). This connection to school provides a sense of belonging and enables youth to foster relationships with teachers and peers. Unfortunately, not all students thrive in mainstream schools. Young people today have many temptations and challenges such as violence, drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, and numerous other potential distractions from healthy and productive lifestyles (Penn, Doll, & Grandgenett, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Poverty, dysfunctional families, housing instabilities, and various forms of abuse are just some of the other crippling issues our youth face on a daily basis. These problems are what lead educators to identify youth as *at risk* or *high risk*.

At-risk is a multifaceted label applied to particular youth in any educational setting on a daily basis. When educators use the term *at-risk*, they are referring to the multitude of issues mentioned above (Brownell, Roos, MacWilliam, LeClair, Ekuma, & Fransco, 2010; Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Smith et al., 2007; Wotherspoon, & Schissel, 2001). Students may also appear lethargic, withdrawn, or sad in addition to the behavioural characteristics. These issues play a major role in the psycho-social development of these students which adds to their characterization of at-risk. Furthermore, an extension of the label at-risk is high-risk youth who are the at-risk youth disconnected from school, family and community,

compounding the risks and challenges of their lives (Penn, Doll, & Grandgenett, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Smith et al., 2007). Education systems previously have forgotten, marginalized, or misrepresented these students, which is why it is essential for teachers to look at the etiology of a student in order to effectively identify how a risk factor came into existence for each particular child (Hoffman, 2011; Thiessen, 2006).

When identifying at-risk youth in classrooms, educators are aware they are at risk of not completing high school. The lack of a high school diploma remains a significant predictor of negative outcomes, including future poverty and unemployment (Boys and Girls Club of Canada, 2008; Brownell et al., 2010; Schonert-Reichl, 2000). These students are also at risk of being involved in the child welfare system and becoming teen mothers (Brownell et al., 2010; Penn, Doll, & Grandgenett, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Youth violence and the corresponding close relationship between youth violence and substance abuse is perhaps one of the deadliest of these at-risk identifications (Penn, Doll, & Grandgenett, 2008). Less is understood about youth protective factors which appear to help provide youth with the stability and direction needed to avoid unhealthy or risky behaviour. Understanding what prevents these behaviours may provide solutions that are easier to tackle than addressing the large social, environmental, and family problems associated with risk factors that confront them on a daily basis (Penn, Doll, & Grandgenett, 2008).

Being able to identify at-risk behaviors is only part of the issue in relation to education. Teacher training also has a significant impact on student wellbeing and early detection of risk indicators. Teachers who teach in mainstream and alternative education settings face challenges they are not specifically trained to address (Aschroft, Price, & Sweeney, 1998). Due to lack of teacher training, knowledge, and time, at-risk students are

still taught using uniform teaching or blanket teaching (Cook-Sather, 2006; Hamblin, 2000; Thiessen, 2006). This uniformity demands that students be able to conform, to compete, to absorb knowledge, and to easily transmit knowledge that that is taught. Some teachers also believe at-risk learners are inappropriate role models, display negative peer pressure, and add a bad element to the overall educational environment (Gardner, & Toope, 2011; Janosz, Belleau, Archam, Parent, & Pagani, 2011). It is for reasons such as these that teachers should have a higher degree of education and special training. This lack of education and training is one of many reasons our schools are failing these youths, next to funding, staffing, and obtainment of smaller class sizes.

Access to supportive educational programs and having a connection to school are vital protective factors in the lives of youth, particularly those disengaged from home and community (Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Smith et al., 2007). School thus becomes the only safe and stable place. School becomes an environment where trusting and supportive relationships with adults can be created and fostered. School also becomes a place where youth can get connected to other social supports (Smith et al., 2007). Additionally, having access and the ability to offer alternative education settings to students provide opportunities for at-risk students to benefit from formal education and to minimalize costs and disruptions they pose to mainstream education (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Education programs that address the complex social and educational needs of at-risk and high-risk students are necessary to ensure that students have the appropriate tools and social supports to navigate a smooth transition into adulthood.

Society has a responsibility to youth and to find a way to keep them away from risk factors. At-risk children are more than just a familial and educational problem; they are a

societal one. Society has the power to influence the self-worth of a child and how they respond to risk factors. Families, schools, and communities need to provide optimal learning and social environments for youth. Through this collaboration, society can prepare well-adjusted, educated, and responsible youth to step forward when it is their time. Everyone needs to take an active role in order to combat this chronic issue.

Statistics on At-Risk Students

Approximately 20% of the children and youth in Canada are at risk for developing problems that jeopardize their present and future adjustment (Schonert-Reichl, 2000). Additionally, 30-40% of Canadian children are deemed to be at risk of not completing high school and 1.2 million or 27.6% of Canadian children under the age of 11 can be considered vulnerable to emotional, behavioural, social, or academic problems (Boys and Girls Club of Canada, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Approximately 30% of 15-20 year old's do not complete school and more than 70% of Canadians who enter federal prisons are high school dropouts; 4 out of 5 have substance abuse problems, and 2 out of 3 have mental health issues (Schonent-Reichl, 2008; Smith et al, 2007; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Most students at-risk drop out in the eighth grade (Smith et al, 2007). These statistics are exactly why we need to place intervention programs in early childhood to help increase school completion, decrease teen pregnancy, decrease involvement with the criminal justice system, and increase employment and earnings in adulthood. Educators need to design complex and comprehensive interventions that take into consideration multiple contexts of functioning. Interventions need to focus on factors that lead to problematic functioning alongside strengths within the child and his or her social milieu (Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Thiessen, 2006).

Visible minorities, those living in the inner city, and those individuals living at a low socioeconomic status have a higher likelihood of experiencing academic failure than those who are not (Aschroft, Price, & Sweeney, 1998; Brownell et al., 2010; Schonert-Reichl, 2000; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Aboriginal children have a lower level of education completion and attainment in virtually all age levels and children in foster care are more likely to have difficulty in school (Brownell et al., 2010; Schonent-Reichl, 2008; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). These at-risk youths also have an eight times higher chance of withdrawing from school than those in higher economic status (Brownell et al., 2010).

It would appear that these statistics mean that these students require a higher rate of needing special education services. It may also mean they have a higher rate of absenteeism and tardiness and are more likely to use substances, be expelled, and are less likely to graduate. Furthermore, their school scores are 15 to 20 percent lower than normal-achieving peers, causing the likelihood of repeating at least one grade (Brownell et al., 2010; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

Additionally, adolescents living in families receiving income assistance tend to have lower cognitive achievement and higher levels of behavioural and emotional problems than do adolescents whose mothers having left assistance or having never been on assistance (Brownell et al., 2010). Students born to teen mothers tend to have poorer educational outcomes, poorer reading ability and psychological well being, initiate sexual activity early, are likely to be in contact with criminal justice system, and be involved with substance abuse (Brownell et al., 2010; Schonent-Reichl, 2008; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). For instance, Brownell et al. (2010) reported that young adults with three risk factors had 14 times the odds of ending up on income assistance themselves, and for females, 13 times the odds for

giving birth during adolescence. This research suggests a cycle of disadvantage for youth at risk. Youths who do not complete high school have difficulty transitioning into adulthood causing them to be incapable of becoming productive members of our communities and furthering their education (Brownell et al, 2010; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Without high school and further education, the cycle of poverty will continue.

A child's and adolescent's functioning in school is inextricably linked with his or her sense of belonging and connection to the school environment and his or her relationship with peers and teachers within it (Schonent-Reichl, 2008). Access to supportive educational programs and having a connection to school are vital protective factors in lives of youth particularly those disengaged from home and community (Smith et al, 2008). School thus becomes the only place safe and stable for some youth as it provides trusting supportive relationships absent of scrutiny. Due to legal, social, behavioural, emotional, psychological, and instructional challenges, at-risk students change the learning dynamic of our classrooms (Aschroft, Price, & Sweeney, 1998). Educators and peers struggle to see and understand the variances of learning styles, behaviours, and ambitions of these at-risk students. This lack of understanding causes at-risk students to fear or distrust people in authority and experience a lack of affinity with regular school (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) stressed the importance of providing students with equitable learning opportunities. In order to effectively address the issues of at-risk learners and learners, in general, it is crucial educators understand risk and its implications on students inside and outside of school. If educational centres ignore, refuse, or are unable to further educate themselves on how to not only connect student lives to the prescribed learning material, but also to implement effective interventions in dealing with risk factors,

they will only deepen the progression of at-risk behaviours in the student population. Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) stated that if schools are unable to fulfill their role providing students with a diverse range of programming and interventions, school drop-out rates before graduation will increase from 25% to 40%. It is for these reasons, further understanding of risk, what it means to have effective programming, and how to successfully implement interventions are required by all involved in the educational setting.

Situating the Researcher

It was my first day of teaching at an inner-city school located in Edmonton, Alberta when I realized there was nothing I learned in my university education program that prepared me for the students whom I was now responsible for educating. I sat in my English 10 classroom watching 40 high-risk youth fill the tables around me. I remember wondering how I was going to approach them. There were gang members, youth attending because of parole conditions, youth who walked to school without shoes or jackets, those being dropped off by youth workers from one of the local group homes, some high on various substances, some unresponsive and lethargic, and some coming directly from the street due to homelessness. As I looked around, I also realized I was the same age as some of my students as they ranged from 13-25 years. I will admit I was afraid. How was I going to educate all of these students? What issue should I deal with first? The students high on substances? The student without shoes? Have they eaten breakfast? Or should I just jump into the course overview, expectations, and lesson?

It is important for me to admit that as I was observing these students, my students, I was judging them. I had no knowledge of their personal story or the struggles they were going through on a daily basis but here I was, wearing clean clothes, fed, with a good

education, judging them and expecting them to automatically respect me because I was their teacher. This is where I will also admit that I got a reality check, quickly. It was me who had to earn their trust and respect first. I had students who would not sit in my classroom because they did not trust me. I had students who were unresponsive so when I asked them questions I had to assume they understood what I was saying. I had students who would have outbursts and use profanity and threaten me because my response or direction was unwelcomed. I also had students who experienced abuse so they would only allow me within certain proximity. I also discovered that I had students who suffered from schizophrenia and other emotional issues such as cutting and thoughts of suicide. How was I going to deal with all of this? I had a lot of learning to do. I knew I had to redefine who I was as a teacher, a mentor, a community member, and an individual.

As I progressed through my first semester with these students, I had so many questions. I wondered how and why our current education system failed these students. I wondered how we as a society allowed these young youths to experience such trauma. I wondered what, if anything, public schools were doing in order to help students in their mainstream classrooms from becoming one of my students. I wondered what communities and schools were doing to ensure that more children do not become a statistic. This realization of how naïve and unprepared I was to a majority of the issues the students in my classroom were dealing with was really startling and disheartening.

Because of my experience teaching high-risk, marginalized youth, I felt it was important all current and future educators had access to an easy to use handbook to identify at-risk youth in their mainstream classrooms and strategies they could apply and resources they could access. One goal of this manual was to provide current and future educators,

administrators, and teacher aides with effective strategies to educate not only youth but also themselves. An additional goal for this project was to find alternative teaching strategies to attract and motivate students in an educational environment that were student centered and involved a physical component.

Information researched for this manual was purposeful. Statistics, methods, alternatives, accessing school and community supports was all conducted for the purpose of informing and encouraging educators to initiate help and to inform them there is help available beyond the classroom. This manual has been prepared to help administrators, teachers, and teachers aides discover and apply successful strategies aimed at youth at-risk participating in the school classroom. These strategies are meant to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. The purpose of this manual is to help educators to look beyond the behaviour of the student and to look at the cause of the behaviour. It also aims to define risk factors enabling educators to have a concrete meaning of what it means to have an at-risk student in their classroom. The strategies provided are all taken from research and that can easily be applied to the general classroom setting. Suggested and recommended practices are based on procedures and strategies used successfully by experienced educators working with high-risk youth. Included will also be alternative programs teachers can recommend to administration and families if all resources and strategies have been exhausted. At the end of the handbook will be workshops and conferences available to teachers to help them become stronger educators.

Chapter Summary

The statistics for youth not completing school are unsettling. It is also saddening the amount of challenges students are experiencing outside of the school environment in their homes, communities, and personal lives. The long-term effects on communities is

detrimental if our youth are unable to be successful and beneficial contributors. It is for reasons such as these it is important for students to receive an equitable education. Educators need to have the knowledge of a variety of supports within the school and within the community in order to meet the needs of youth. Therefore, it is essential for educators to familiarize themselves with the roles each member the school community has to offer, be willing to experiment with teaching strategies, be flexible, and be aware of community supports available to ensure student success.

In the next four chapters, readers will firstly encounter a literature review presented in Chapter 2. The purpose of this review is to define intervention strategies and how and when to apply them. This review also provides readers with four intervention techniques that can be applied easily in mainstream classrooms. Next, Chapter 3 will provide readers with information regarding the research methods and paradigm used to conduct research for the handbook and the reasons for the chosen method. Then, Chapter 4 contains the results of the qualitative content analysis results and the actual handbook. Lastly, Chapter 5 contains a summary of the findings and recommendations of actions to be taken in order to create an inclusive educational community.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Interventions are vital to the success of at-risk youth and can be described as any planned action to increase some aspect of a student's school experience in response to a persistent and serious problem (DeNafo, 1993; Park & Scott, 2009). If serious behaviour and emotional problems have not been altered by the time students enter secondary school, they can be considered chronic and can interfere with successful school experiences, academic functioning, and positive relationships with peers and teachers (Montague, Enders, Cavendish & Castro, 2011; Park &Scott, 2009). It has been reported that students in Grades 7-12 are when most dropout rates occur and secondary school is the last opportunity to attempt to improve the status of at-risk students in schools (Cheng, 1994; DeNafo, 1993; Wotherspoon, 2001). Interventions thus become vital in order to reduce risk factors and ensure students are awarded the supports and opportunities to overcome challenges to achieve success.

In his seminal work, DeNafo (1993) emphasized that behaviours should be targets of intervention for increased academic performance and have been broken into three levels. First, individual strategies or special accommodations for individual student needs have to be made. Second, the school needs to come together and focus on a targeted group. Third, youth must have access to their community outside the school environment. In order for intervention models to be successful, it is important teachers have access to support services, pay attention to parental involvement, introduce peer mentoring, and have small class sizes. Utilizing these strategies will help to build a strong learning environment for students and teachers.

Some research studies have reported that one high school student drops out every nine seconds (Brownell et al., 2010; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Wotherspoon, 2001).

Another study revealed that 1 in 8 children never graduate from high school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Students with disabilities are more likely to drop out than their general education peers (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Dropout rates are disproportionately high for Hispanic, African American, Native American, and low-income backgrounds; students who live in single-parent homes; and those who attend large urban schools (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Park & Scott, 2009). The highest dropout rates include students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Park & Scott, 2009; Theissen, 2006; Wotherspoon, 2001). Without a diploma, the possibility of these students securing employment is increasingly and virtually impossible.

The aforementioned statistics illustrate the magnitude of having unidentified at-risk youth in our classrooms and improper intervention strategies in place. Therefore, the importance of designing interventions that focus on factors that lead to problematic functioning (risk factors) along with strengths within the child and his or her social milieu (protective factors) becomes that much more vital (Schonent-Reichl, 2008). Educators need to design complex and comprehensive interventions that take into consideration multiple contexts of functioning (family, school, peer group, and community) in order to meet the needs of all students.

In order to validate the benefit physical activity has on at-risk youth and children, I will outline the research on the effectiveness of implementing active engagement in educational environments. Next, I will explain methods of designing a classroom community in order to create an equitable and safe learning environment. Then, I will present studies on applying a strength-based approach with the purpose of encouraging educators to utilize student background knowledge within a context of relevant curriculum objectives. Finally, I

will share information on incorporating social justice in the classroom to promote student voice and sense of control.

Active Engagement and Adventure-Based Learning

Physical fitness in public schools fails to address the problem of student disaffection (Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006). It is important to recognize that the gymnasium and school field can be environments conductive to alienation. In traditionally-organized physical education classes, competition, peer favouritism, peer rejection, and the praise of individual skills as opposed to group accomplishment are celebrated. As a result, fear of failure, rejection, and purpose are common outcomes for some students. This kind of environment can also be a breeding ground for the development of unhealthy relationships between student peers and between students and teachers (Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006). In my opinion, it is for these reasons, it is critical to adopt a holistic approach to physical fitness that recognizes the multidimensional aspects of students' lives.

With this knowledge, Sandford, Armour, and Warmington (2006) reviewed literature focusing on disaffected youth and physical activity interventions within the school context. Their review attempted to explain the benefits sports/physical activity programs had on disaffected youth in schools. Five keys issues were addressed through their review of conducted research that consisted of: defining disaffected youth as a social issue; tackling disaffection in schools; exploring the role of physical activity and sport within schools; analyzing claims made for the potential of physical activity interventions; and identifying considerations that might usefully inform future physical/disaffected youth interventions, and any associated impact/evaluation studies.

Through their research, Sandford, Armour, and Warmington (2006) explained that truancy, exclusion, and educational attainment were on the rise and that youth skipping school was on the rise by 15% since 1997 (Clennell, 2003 as cited in Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006). Exclusion rates have also been on the rise indicating 9549 youth were permanently removed from school in 2001/02 which is a 4% increase from the previous year (DfES, 2003a as cited in Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006). The authors also reported that two out of three of youth who are excluded from the school setting will not return to a mainstream school full-time (McConville, 1998 as cited in Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006). It is believed that schools are failing youth indicated by 10,000 youth dropping out per year meaning 15-30% of youth do not attain an education (Clare, 2003 as cited in Sandford, Armour, & Warmington). It is from these statistics the government in England decided to institute a behaviour improvement strategy which focussed on physical activity and sport in order to re-engage disaffected youth.

Sandford, Armour, and Warmington (2006) pointed out introducing physical fitness programs can meet the needs of disaffected youth. Research found that physical training which increased physical fitness could be a core intervention but it is only one element of an intervention approach. Physical fitness not only has physical health benefits but psychological ones as well.

Sandford, Armour, and Warmington (2006) communicated that this process could lead to behavioural changes for dealing with many problems at-risk youth experience by increasing responsibility, goal setting, and self-worth. By adding physical fitness into the routines of at-risk youth, educators are providing them with the structure and discipline they are looking for and missing from their lives.

Sandford, Armour, and Warmington (2006) also showed there was a lack of systematic research and credible longitudinal monitoring of programming which can lead to the failing of physical programs. However, the authors stressed that the benefits to incorporating fitness into programming of disaffected youth outweighs the indecision regarding the impact of physical fitness. Using physical activity as a basis to reach at-risk youth is a positive way to add meaning and self-worth to their lives. Adding the physical component into these programs helps to promote skilled learning, responsibility, and accountability for behaviour as well as goal-setting, planning, and positive life-style changes. This physical element provides these at-risk youths with more energy, more discipline, and self-confidence to commit to other interventions by undergoing the physical training process. It also allows at-risk youth to socialize beyond their family boundaries and make new and meaningful relationships.

Barker and Forneris (2011) conducted a study targeting 26 at-risk youth. The participants consisted of 23 males and three females between the ages of 12 and 17. All participants were defined as at-risk youth. Participants came from low socio-economic status, or were under the care of social services, or were in contact with social services for a variety of reasons. The purpose of this study was to develop and enhance the physical and psychosocial health of at-risk youth through the collaboration of community service agencies.

The intervention took place over an eight-week time period. It consisted of three 60-minute fitness sessions per week for a total of 24 sessions. During the intervention process, a program consultant was active to discuss student progress, challenges, successes, and goals within the program and outside the program. Life skills were also a part of this intervention

and conducted inside a classroom. Physical activity was a combination of individual and group cooperative activities.

Upon program completion, students were asked to complete feedback forms. Within these forms, students reported feelings of empowerment throughout the intervention. Having a voice through the creation of rules, establishing consequences, and setting expectations allowed students to feel that their voices were respected and that they had control of their learning. This process also allowed youth to set goals for health inside and outside the program, which included healthy eating habits, overcoming obstacles, distraction, and recognition of the manner in which others might hinder their progress toward achieving their goals. At program completion, youth successes were celebrated.

The results of this study indicated youth were very respectful toward the site and each other throughout the program. The results of fitness tests indicated participants improved their physical health and strength significantly. Youth rated the program 9.2 out of 10, signifying their enjoyment. All participants except one expressed interest in continuing and having opportunities to access the community facilities that would enable them to be active. Youth also reported feeling more motivated and inspired to continue being active and trying new ideas or activities. The results of this study demonstrated the positive effects physical fitness had on at-risk youth. Adventure-based learning, a form of physical literacy, creates an atmosphere of acceptance, trust, and cohesion allowing student self-esteem to increase (Glass & Shoffner, 2001). This form of learning allows youth to feel part of a healthy group which is something that many of these youth do not have access to. Adventure-based learning takes place in an outdoor setting. It consists of highly-structured physical activity with periods of reflection (Stuhr, Sutherland, Ressler, & Ortiz-Stuhr, 2016). It is a positive form of therapy

which can be easily applied to mainstream classrooms. Not only does this form of learning serve as a positive form of rehabilitation for juvenile delinquents, promote growth for individuals with disabilities, and serve as therapy for families in crisis, it is an excellent tool for professionals to use as motivational team-building (Glass & Shoffner, 2001; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997).

Applying adventure-based learning to class settings can be done quite easily. It is aimed toward learning in a noncompetitive group setting. Adventure-based learning cannot be completed on its own as it involves cooperation, communication, problem-solving, and group decision making, thus creating a higher educational value awarding participants more control over educational outcomes (Hattie et al., 1997; Stuhr et al., 2016). It also focuses on interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Stuhr et al., 2016). Tasks start off easy in a wilderness setting and then get more physically and mentally challenging. The group is consistently challenged and each activity is meant to build upon the previous one. These activities focus on increasing student social skills and the ability to work with peers in order to complete tasks (Glass & Shoffner, 2001; Hattie et al., 1997; Stuhr et al., 2016). Upon the completion of each task, the teacher leader will sit with the group and discuss their experience as it is a critical part of the programming. It is during this discussion their experience can be metaphorically related to student current personal struggles and they can make sense of their interpersonal and intrapersonal understanding (Stuhr et al., 2016).

Exposing students to alternative forms of learning such as adventure-based learning allows them to become aware of the perspective of others and apply it to their own decision-making. It helps to foster caring, trusting, and tolerant relationships (Glass & Shoffner, 2001; Stuhr et al., 2016). As a result, these skills may be useful in reducing violence and increasing

prosocial skills and behaviours in youth. The positive effects of this form of group structure also create an atmosphere of safety. Students are more likely to feel they can disclose more information in regards to their every day challenges and seek guidance which is something they may feel incapable of doing when participating in a class where they feel disconnected (Glass & Shoffner, 2001; Hattie et al., 1997).

Creating Classroom Communities

School reform initiatives improve when professionals collaborate to exchange ideas, provide support, offer critiques, and share expertise (Mitra, 2009). Teaching learning communities focuses on teacher collaboration to share information, build knowledge, foster leadership, and discover how to develop practice together (Mitra, 2009). Researchers suggest including youth as part of this collaboration (Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2009). Allowing this participation is considered a form of student voice and both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to decision-making process, to learn from one another, and to promote change (Mitra, 2009). Many educators may agree that student voice is underutilized. Acceptance of student voice in the decisions of the classroom allows for trust and respect to be created. It is important to recognize that all members of the classroom environment feel they have a meaningful role in their learning and the direction of it.

Mitra (2009) drew on interview data from youth and adults participating in a collaborative learning community to describe the importance classroom relationships play in the learning of students. The author examined four elements that included: (1) fostering trust and respect among group members; (2) creating meaningful roles; (3) building capacity for youth and adults to successfully fulfill their roles; and (4) establishing group size that is not too big or small. Mitra (2009) built his findings from a three-year embedded case study of

two youth-adult partnerships in a high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. This study included the examination of processes and outcomes of developing student voice initiatives. Additionally, this study was derived from a second, larger study designed to examine a broader sample of youth-adult partnerships in the same geographic area. For the purposes of Mitra (2009), a multiple case study designed was implemented for the purpose of explanation building. The goal of his research sample was to identify sites that have committed to fostering youth-adult partnerships.

A sample was taken from 13 urban high schools. Schools were located either in an inner-city environment or a bedroom community that consisted of urban characteristics including an ethnically diverse population. All but three schools had 2,000 students or more. Two schools were "last chance" institutions where students were given the opportunity to finish their diploma. All groups involved with the study had a core group of three to eight youth (ages 13-19). Each group was supervised by one or two adult advisors.

Data collection consisted of interviews, observations, and document analysis. There were also semi structured phone interviews which served as the primary data for Mitra's (2009) research. Reliability was increased during interviews through the systematic seeking of youth and adult participant perspectives. Interview data was collected once in the first few months of the study, then again another few month after the study, and finally, one more time three years later. During data collection, groups who were still in existence utilizing the collaborative approach, were asked to share the nature of their ongoing work and to share preliminary findings. Each of these interviews included three students and all adults involved from each group. Interviews were 60 minutes each. Additionally, a small number of in depth observations of mandatory meetings were conducted for validity purposes. This allowed the

researcher to observe the 13 groups individually and for the groups to share their success and struggles in order to foster collaborative communication between groups.

The interviews revealed youth involved in the program felt they could trust their advisors and their advisors were good role models. Youth also reported they felt appreciated and respected because they were encouraged to voice their opinions and were given the opportunity to lead activities. Advisors who took part in the study reported they were more conscious in making sure everyone feels comfortable so trust could be built. They also reported youth had grown mentally, socially, and were empowered to tackle new activities. Throughout the learning process of the study, advisors also felt that they had a lot more learning to do resulting in their request for further training. Advisors also announced that they extended activities from the classroom into the community by setting aside time for full day retreats and weekend meetings for community building and developing specific skills, including fostering respect and team building for all members involved with process. Finally, it was communicated that in order for a collaborative learning community to be successful, groups of 10-15 students worked best as too many students destroy the sense of community due to all the different personalities. Some students also divulged they felt their voice was not being heard or was not meaningful in larger groups.

Additionally, in order for students to achieve success and want to achieve success, it is crucial teachers create an effective learning environment (Cheng, 1994). Students need to feel that their teacher cares for them and supports them. They also need to feel that they are not being forced to learn or punished if a desired learning outcome or behaviour is not displayed. It is also important for teachers to create a classroom climate that demonstrates the professional knowledge of the teacher, as well as teacher morality and personality. The

creation of this learning environment enables students to feel safe and comfortable as they work on building trust and giving trust to peers and teachers while building relationships.

Cheng (1994) conducted a cross-sectional survey in order to demonstrate the influence teachers and classroom environments played in the educational outcomes and behaviours displayed by students. Data were taken from an ongoing large scale research project on educational quality in Hong Kong primary schools. This study consisted of 678 classes of Grade 6 students in 190 sampled schools. The total number of sampled students was 21, 622. Class sizes consisted of 32 students on average.

For measurement, Cheng (1994) adapted Moos and Trickett's (1974) instrument which is widely used for studying classroom social climate. This tool was also used because reliability and validity have already been established. Cheng (1994) explained that he adapted the instrument to look specifically at student and teacher involvement, affiliation, teacher support, task orientation, rule clarity, teacher control, and innovation. Students were asked to describe their class on the instruments five-point scale. Students were to record how they perceived their class environment (room cleanliness, crowding); teacher behaviour (willingness to listen to student opinions); use of power (reward, punishment, respect); and student affective performance (attitudes toward peers, teacher, and self; intention to drop out).

Results from analysis of data indicated that the physical and psychological environments are equally important for students (Cheng, 1994). These environments affect the learning attitude of students and their behaviour. It is therefore important for teachers to consider their classroom space, lighting, and desk or table design. These elements are what create a welcoming learning environment. The psychological environment refers to the social

quality of both the school and classroom. The psychological environment is how social relationships between students and teachers are created. The school environment can influence student behavior in four different levels (Cheng, 1994). The first level is referred to as the relationship level. It involves student participation and attentiveness, development of peer relationships, and teacher support. The second level is individual growth which focuses on how the teacher plans activities and student academic competition. It is important to note here that for many at-risk youth, academic competition as part of daily class routine tends to be a negative influence on student motivation for task completion so teachers need to be careful when using it. The third level is referred to as system maintenance which looks at the order and organization of the classroom. With regards to this level, teachers need to ensure they are creating a classroom system where students want to display positive and healthy behaviors and show respect to all members of the environment. When organizing activities, teachers need to ensure these are well-organized and that the rules within the class are clear. Finally, the fourth level is teacher innovation. This is important because it involves teacher methodology. It looks at how the teacher designs class activities to encourage student participation. Teachers should not be afraid to experiment with different methods and are encouraged to talk with colleagues to see what successful strategies are being applied in their classrooms.

Results from Mitra's (1994) data analysis also detailed the critical role management style had on students. Traditionally teachers are the leaders and students the followers. This technique is not successful for at-risk youth. At-risk youth usually come in to a class with negative feelings toward authority, trust issues, and previous negative educational experiences. This is why it is important for teachers to create a management style that

enables at-risk youth to have a voice and feel that they are in control. In order to do this, teachers need set up communication channels, working procedures, and rules that enable positive relationships to develop between teacher and student (Cheng, 1994; Johnson, 2000). Teachers need to be aware of how they use the power of rewards, their position as a teacher, their personal power, and their expertise (Cheng, 1994). The misuse of any of these forms of power can change the classroom environment in relation to student behaviour, motivation, and esteem, which then can lead to the unintentional encouragement of student dropout which was evident in survey results reported from students (Cheng, 1994).

Teachers using democratic leadership are more positively able to create a climate of positive learning (Cheng, 1994). Survey results from Cheng (1994) proclaimed students were more active participants and learn more. Within this democratic learning environment, it is critical for teachers to be flexible with student evaluations. When working with at-risk youth, it is important to understand and value the different skills and abilities students are bringing with them to school. As educators, we know the importance evaluation plays on a student self-efficacy and motivation. Teachers need to find the balance of focusing on individual achievable student goals while at the same time providing challenge. All of these factors influence student attitude and whether they want to return to class.

Additionally, it is equally important to look at behavioural phenotypes. Phenotypes are patterns of behaviour or the specific and characteristic behavioural repertoire displayed by students with certain conditions (Winzer, 2008). Current research stresses the importance of educators to maintain knowledge in the etiology, symptomology, and treatment of conditions that trigger certain behaviours (Freund, Casey, & Bradley, 1982 as cited in Winzer, 2008). Teachers who take the time to educate themselves with the lives of their

students will help to create understanding which enhances student and teacher relationships (Winzer, 2008). This personal understanding will also enable teachers to develop an appreciation for all the elements students are experiencing outside of the school environment.

Implementing intervention programs at an earlier age than secondary school allows for a stronger rate of positive impact (DeNafo, 1993). Effective intervention programs are those that increase students desire to learn and enhance their academic performance. This can be accomplished through small class sizes, well trained and dedicated staff, program flexibility, and the link with the community which the particular school system serves (DeNafo, 1993; Johnson, 2000; Winzer, 2008). Highly effective programs are those that have individualized programming, peer tutoring, teacher aides, after school and summer programs, flexible schedules, parental involvement, and holistic or multi-faceted approach to intervention (Deshler, 1993; Hanson, Silver, & Strong, 1991; Jackard, 1988).

Strength-Based Approach

A strength-based (SB) approach is one way for educators to provide inclusive learning opportunities for all students (Gardner & Toope, 2011). The SB approach challenges deficit-based perspectives and enacts on equitable schooling practices toward students experiencing social and educational marginalization (Gardner & Toope, 2011). Youth involved in this approach are meant to be fully involved in their learning which allows them to have power and break down barriers they are facing both academically and socially through social justice due to the belief by some, that at-risk learners pose dangers to other learners (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Janosz, Pascal, Belleau, Archman, Parent, & Pagani, 2011).

SB education can be defined as the philosophical stance and daily practice that shapes how an individual engages the teaching and learning process (Gardner & Toope, 2011). This approach emphasizes the positive aspects of student effort and achievement as well as human strengths. Educators are offered a potentially rich and varied landscape from which to engage the strengths of youth. To apply the SB approach, educators simply need to use positive psychology, focus on positive youth development, explore the socio-cultural approaches to teaching, and look to their community for additional support (Gardner & Toope, 2011).

When an at-risk student is in the classroom, it is helpful to access a student's virtual schoolbag (Gardner & Toope, 2011). As many educators can attest, everyone comes to school with a virtual backpack that contains information such as life experiences. The SB approach emphasizes accessing this information because it contains strengths students can apply to the school curriculum. Educators can change their literacy curriculum by drawing on student interests and popular culture sitting in their backpacks (Gardner & Toope, 2011). This also allows teachers to develop a new perspective and appreciation for the knowledge and strengths students bring with them to class. New teaching and learning opportunities are created because mutual understanding and respect are formed through the process.

A study conducted in the eastern region in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador focused on teachers who worked with youth in different educational roles and in various educational contexts (Gardner & Toope, 2011). This study involved 10 teacher participants (six male and four female) who had extensive experience working with youth experiencing educational and social barriers. The purpose of the study was to discover what it meant to engage in SB approaches from a social justice perspective. Data was collected through email, telephone conversation, and face-to-face contact where participants shared

their viewpoints and experiences on a SB approach. The study concentrated on four SB social justice themes focusing on recognizing students in context, critically engaging strengths and positivity, nurturing democratic relations, and enacting creative and flexible pedagogies. These four themes were interconnected with the teachers' lived experiences and how their personal experiences shaped their teaching practices. The importance of the study was getting to know students and using student knowledge to inform their practice. Teachers could draw from student economic, familial, community, and cultural contexts. Holistic identification of students was the main focus of the educators SB work in this study as it intended to magnify educational equity for students who experienced marginalization in school.

Educators in the study had to become creative and flexible in order to grab and maintain the interest of students while presenting the curriculum. It was important for students to feel resourceful and independent in their learning. Student lives outside of school were incorporated into their learning and their eclectic range of responsibilities outside of school were acknowledged. Through this portion of the study some teachers began to question how they described intelligence and, began to realize the need to expand their definition of intelligence. Teachers were able to recognize students in contexts and address the educational inequities which occur when schools are decontextualized from student lives.

There were three ways educators engaged in strength and positivity from a social justice perspective: viewing students as experts in their learning, being critical of narrow understanding of strengths and being committed to using strengths and positivity to inform practices. These levels of engagement gave some teachers an epiphany. They realized that yes, our children are our future, but they are also our right now. Youth can have just as much

impact on the world today as they can in the future. Allowing students to write their own story along their educational and life journey allows everyone to share roles as the teacher and the learner equally, without hierarchy.

In relation to the SB approach above, a similar study was conducted in a Florida high school where 29 teacher volunteers were assigned 29 students who were considered to be at-risk (Testerman, 1996). The purpose of the study was to prove that individualized concern for an at-risk student could have significant positive effect on that student's attendance, self-concept, self-assessment on intellectual and social status, and dropout rates. The results of the study were compared to a random group of students who had grade point averages (GPA) that stood 1.5 or less on a four-point scale (Testerman 1996).

The impact of the study proved that students who did have a one-on-one teacher support had improved attendance and their mean GPA rose above 1.5 compared to those who did not, which stayed at mean GPA of 0.66 (Testerman, 1996). Teachers also noted that students involved with the study were happier and friendlier, were studying more, were sleeping less in class, were more attentive to their studies, and became more open and fun. Additionally, students felt that someone cared for them and they were excited to share their academic accomplishments with someone.

Teacher volunteers became motivated by the witnessed success of the students. New strategies and techniques were explored by the teacher advisors which allowed them to encourage their advisee to open up about their goals and aspirations. It is important to note that for the purposes of this study, advisors were not expected to discuss anything personal in order to show that they cared for the student. The study proved that students need to feel loved, valued, and accepted in order to find their drive for success.

Social Justice

Many educators already know that, when working with at-risk students the definition of strengths needs to be broad. Acts such as walking through the front doors of the school may be one of the biggest accomplishments of the day for a student who has no support at home. For this specific accomplishment to be achieved, a student needs to have life skills such as the ability to get themselves out of bed, feed themselves, find and pay for transportation, and deal with any responsibilities or conflicts they have at home before they leave for school (Gardner & Toope, 2011). With the addition of new language such as multiple, diversity, holistic, and life experiences, the expansion of the broad view of what constitutes as strengths is created. The term is now all-encompassing and includes student daily life experiences.

To apply social justice in the classroom it is important for the educator to be flexible, rethink approaches, and use a broad range of pedagogical strategies (Cook-Sather, 2006; Gardner & Toope, 2011). Teachers need to create opportunities for students to be successful in order for school to be rewarding, positive, and equitable for them in order to actively shape education (Cook-Sather, 2006). Through social justice, educators can reinforce the SB approach goals which are school engagement, empowerment, and educational change (Gardner & Toope, 2011; Jackard, 1988). Teaching is directed toward individual students and helping to guide students through their own social contexts as they navigate through the education system. Allowing students to take part in goal setting and the assignment selection process allows them to feel in control and that they have a meaningful contribution to their learning and, therefore, are more likely to put in more time and effort (Cook-Sather, 2006; Deschler, 1993).

In addition to goals, creating a stigma-free environment is also important (Jackard, 1988). If students are surrounded by others who have strong self-worth, this behaviour can be re-learned and they, too, can obtain self-recognition again. Jackard (1988) and Johnson (2000) have noted a gap in education and its failure to teach values (Jackard, 1988; Johnson, 2000). Humans naturally have a need to obtain a sense of purpose, importance, relevance, identification, gratification, and individuality. If values are not taught to students, then the rest of the subject matter becomes meaningless (Jackard, 1988). Educators must teach youth to see the why choices which identify the reasons behind actions, the paths people take to achieve their purpose, what is right and wrong, and the ability to identify bad or good. Students need to understand the significance of values before good decisions can be made.

Conclusion

Educators need to be willing to explore and apply a variety of strategies to their teaching methodology to ensure students receive an equitable education. As educators, we know many at-risk youth struggle to see the relevance of academics; therefore, it is important an inviting classroom is created. Students will be more willing to attend school if they are exposed to a cohesive learning environment based on mutual respect, trust, and safety. Students who normally reject school will also feel encouraged to attend if the classroom environment allows them to have an active role in their learning.

Applying both social justice and strength-based approaches allows students to become decision makers through negotiation, and consultation. It also allows students to share their voice and demonstrate their knowledge of expertise. Adopting these methods permits students to form relationships with their school, peers, and community while increasing self-efficacy, tolerance, and motivation. SB and social justice can be applied as

cohesive units. Students who already feel disenfranchised from school are able to feel power and ownership of their learning.

Exposure to learning through physical engagement is also highly beneficial. This form of learning forces students to cooperate with others, challenge their thinking and planning skills, observe, and be resourceful, persistent, and adaptable. Adding physical components to education allows students to explore their leadership skills, self-concept, and interpersonal skills. It then becomes more than just a physical activity. It becomes a method of therapy that encourages students to explore and challenge themselves while learning new applicable skills for their daily challenges.

When using any of the suggested approaches, mentoring becomes a factor in student learning. Mentoring has a significant role in all forms of education as is focuses on the social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development of students. When students feel they have a supportive adult they trust, they are more likely to be more successful in academics, but also in their ability to complete high school and to attend college. Not only do youth feel more encouraged to try activities outside of their comfort zone, both physical and mental, positive behaviours increase and student confidence in making better life choices increases.

The approaches suggested for the handbook encourage educators to experiment with their methods of teaching (see Chapter 4). As teachers take the time to further educate themselves using different learning approaches, education will become student-centered. The self-confidence of all members involved in democratic educational environment will also increase. Students will feel their contribution and voice is heard and teachers will have the opportunity to make a significant difference in student lives.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

Destructive environments of poverty and social marginalization are just some of the issues many youths in classrooms and alternative education programs are experiencing. These issues lead them to behaviours of substance abuse, and street culture such as gang involvement, petty and violent crimes, and prostitution. These students are youth who have also experienced or who are experiencing physical or sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, bullying, discrimination, or mental health problems (Collingwood, 1997; Martin & Gonzalez, 2012). Problems accessing food, housing, social supports, and resources outside of the school environment are also difficulties plaguing these youths. As well, students can appear lethargic, withdrawn, or sad, in addition to the behavioural characteristics. These problems play a major role in the psycho-social development of these students leading to their label of at-risk.

This problem is relevant because there are youth in our schools and after school programs who can be characterized as at-risk. Students are struggling and are not always well served by schools because they generally do not fit in with what schools expect and value (Thiessen, 2006). They feel helpless based on their experiences and begin to accept failure. At-risk youth have convinced themselves that their educational problems are due to their low academic ability and do not see the possibility of change. Learning environments have been created where students are expected to adapt to an often difficult or alienating learning environment. It is for these reasons students do not always thrive in mainstream educational settings. Additionally, there is often a lack of staffing supports, resources, teacher education, and small class sizes. In my experience, there is also a deficiency of understanding risk

factors and challenges among staff and students which leads to labelling, shared frustrations, as well as feelings of resentment from both staff and students.

Information presented in this handbook is based on qualitative research. Readers are informed as to why I chose this particular method and the benefits within this paradigm. Next, the research methodology and why this method of unobtrusive data collection allowed me to report my findings in an effective and informative manner. Finally, the method used for research is outlined as the strengths of qualitative content analysis will be described.

Research Paradigm

A qualitative research methodology was used for the purposes of my research. Through qualitative research, I wanted to focus on at-risk students and the importance they play in the social structure of our schools and society. The systematic approach of qualitative methodology provides deeper insight into the phenomenon of at-risk students and the factors defining these students (Creswell, 2009). I chose a qualitative method because I had goals of understanding our educational context, understanding the educators and students within the educational context, and how introducing various strategies affect and interact with students in the educational learning environment.

This handbook provides educators with intervention strategies and approaches to increase the engagement level of youth at-risk in an academic setting using physical activity and community involvement to decrease negative behaviours and increase learning and well-being. This methodology aims to have teachers explore their classroom problems and student risk indicators while reflecting on their practices to help students achieve their potential.

Research Methodology

The methodology used for this handbook was unobtrusive research. Unlike other forms of research, this form of research allowed me to collect data without interfering with subjects and required no direct solicitation from subjects (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966 as cited in Lee, 2000). This type of research is easily adaptable as it permitted the use of any method as long as it supports the focus of my research. It also allowed me to apply multi-method inquiry meaning that results from both quantitative and qualitative research can be reported. This is valuable as various forms of data can be gathered.

Additionally, this form of data collection ensured my presence as a researcher did not distract or influence findings (Lee, 2000) which is valuable because other research platforms depend on subject participation who may be influenced by the researcher through questionnaires and interviewing, as they want to either appear a certain way to the researcher or possibly not want to disclose certain truths. This method also ensured that I was not having to worry about the validity of subject responses. The use of unobtrusive research allowed me to maintain objectivity and reduce bias.

Another strength of unobtrusive research is that it allowed me to correct any mistakes such as documenting incorrect statistics or any misinterpretations of results or meaning I may have made during data collection (Lee, 2000). There were a few instances I had to go back into the found data and find additional information on research methods and measures used in the studies reported which was easily done. There was also an advantage of accessing an eclectic array of information that had already been conducted where validity had been tested.

Research Methods

The method of unobtrusive research used is direct qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Hsien & Shannon, 2005). The topic of at-risk students and effective strategies to implement has been researched before. Direct content analysis allowed me to further explain discoveries made for the purposes of this handbook. The goal of this direct approach was to validate and extend the concept of creating an inclusive learning environment for at-risk students within mainstream and alternative schools. The existing research used for this project has been chosen to support and focus my research. These findings allowed me to create initial themes and codes as I continued my search for information.

Directed content is a structured method of analysis (Hsien & Shannon, 2005). I was able to use existing research to identify key concepts and variables as the initial categories. Examples of these are *at-risk, mainstream schools, literacy, and physical activity*. This process allowed for the coding of information immediately, using these predetermined codes. As research was being conducted, I could add additional information under these codes, and assign new information to a new subcategory such as *community, teacher roles, strategies, and environment*. The codes assigned are a reflection of my research goals which was to find information on students at-risk, interventions, and strategies to help at-risk students to succeed. The main strength of direct content approach is the existing theories can always be further researched and extended (Hsien & Shannon, 2005). It is a flexible method that makes it easy when analysing data.

QCA also allowed me as the researcher to understand the social reality of at-risk youth in a subjective manner. I was able to apply a deductive approach to my research as I have prior experience working with high-risk youth. I was able to create codes ahead of time

such as *alternative programming, training, and challenges* to help focus my research. Furthermore, this allowed me to create new categories and themes when new information was uncovered.

Additionally, QCA permitted me to have a hands-on-approach as I conducted a large amount of research through the examination of 39 articles. I was able to conduct intentional research. This specific research allowed me to describe why mainstream schools have been failing at-risk youth. I was able to identify the challenges at-risk students are experiencing. Triangulation was also part of my research process. I feel quantitative statistical data is crucial to educating readers of the severity of at-risk students in our classrooms. The use of QCA also allowed me to illustrate the range of risk factors affecting at-risk youth, to define the meaning of at-risk youth, and to identify themes within the existing research.

This method of QCA allowed me to reduce data, present it a systematic manner, and apply data in a flexible manner (Schreier, 2012). Using the QCA method let me focus on select aspects of meaning and relate it to the overall research topic of identifying students at-risk and strategies to help them succeed. The handbook will follow the QCA method when coding with the purpose of reading and discovering how the material relates to one another and compares. The information presented is also highly systematic in that I examined a variety of material relevant to the topic of identifying youth at-risk and strategies to help them succeed.

Due to the flexibility of QCA, the material selected is concept and data driven. I was able to put both these forms of information in one coding frame. Concept information and data are presented together in some subcategories and, in others, data will be the main focus. This will be done in order to ensure categories match the data and to create validity in the

information chosen to present. Because the coding frame is the heart of the method (Schreier, 2012), I will include one main category with two subcategories in Chapter 1, and one main category with four subcategories in Chapter 2, and so on. During the research process, there is a lot of information to attend to. I selected specific material to build a code frame which represents information from each source on that particular topic.

When structuring the coding, I focused on a data driven format (Schreier, 2012). Through the use of subsuming procedures, I was able to generate subcategories in a data driven manner once the main categories were determined. This process involved going through selected material to discover relevant information. If I had a subcategory such as *interventions* created already the information fits into, I added it in. If I did not have a subcategory such as *ethics* to which to add the new data, I created a new one.

Coding is a crucial part of analysis (Saldaña, 2009). The codes used in this handbook were chosen with the intention of highlighting significant social, mental, and familial challenges at-risk students face. The codes chosen during the preliminary process of research allowed me to create themes and categories as I put everything together. These themes and categories can be identified as *community supports, school supports, alternative education centers, and social justice*, to name a few. These themes and categories are what bring meaning and purpose to the handbook. To define the categories, I choose a concise description of what readers would be exposed to in that particular category. For example, for Chapter 4, the title is "Identifying at-risk youth: Strategies to help them succeed." As readers continue through the written content a definition of at-risk will be provided for them in addition to examples of indicators to identify youth at-risk.

The data used for coding is from preexisting research studies and articles focusing on at-risk students and learning strategies to help keep them in school. As I conducted research, a first cycle of codes, mostly consisting of single words such as definition, influences, and strategies, were applied to help organize found data. It is rare for coding to be done right in the first stages of code assignment (Saldaña, 2009). With this knowledge, I was aware that my codes may change as I refined them in the final stages of data review.

The goal of qualitative content analysis (QCA) is to identify important aspects of the content surrounding at-risk youth. Using this method allowed me to present the discovered content clearly and effectively to persuade readers to explore different teaching strategies and educate themselves further about challenges students are experiencing outside of school.

The analysis of the qualitative material allowed me to present evidence to readers of its importance. This process enabled me to build an argument as to why it is crucial for teachers to have the skills to be able to identify at-risk youth in their classrooms and different strategies and approaches they can apply to help these students receive an equitable education. This argument is supported through a variety of sources reporting on at-risk students and the positive outcomes that have occurred when teachers are educated and take the time to try new strategies in their teaching. The analysis of the researched content and its presentation enables my handbook to be an influential and effective source for other educational professionals.

In summary, QCA was an effective research method. It allowed me to uncover specific information regarding the effect teachers, peers, community, and familial relationships have on learning environments and motivation for at-risk students. This method also granted me access to qualitative and quantitative information during data collection.

Having access to interviews, surveys, and statistical information allowed for the creation of a cohesive representation of the available research. Relationships between coding categories were easily connected and placed into themes. Finally, due to the flexibility of this research method, I was able to create a useful and informative educational tool for educators during the identification process of at-risk youth and evidence-based strategies to keep them in school.

Chapter 4: Handbook Introduction

As we all know, school plays a vital role in helping youth overcome challenges in their life. Access to a supportive educational environment is a protective factor that connects youth to their communities. The resource handbook presented in this chapter was developed to support teachers to help identify at-risk students within their school community. Within it readers will find information pertaining to risk indicators, what they mean, professional development ideas, evidence-based intervention strategies, school and community supports, and alternative education centers. The goal of this handbook is to provide those working with youth an accessible and relevant tool to apply to their specific classroom and/or school context.

Research Design

Due to the flexibility of qualitative content analysis (QCA) the use of existing validated research findings allowed for the uncovering of specific information relevant to the research goals of the presented handbook which were to: 1. Uncover the statistics of students not completing high school; 2. Find out why students were not completing high school; 3. Identify risk factors and protective factors; and 4. Discover evidence-based intervention strategies that encourage inclusive and equal learning among all students while promoting student strengths and interests.

The data collected during analysis allowed for the consideration of stages of youth development. Data collection also enabled the identification of early-risk factors and promotion of protective factors. Prevention strategies and how to facilitate school, family and community involvement were also involved in the analysis stage.

Findings

Education is the primary factor that enables people to lead healthy, fulfilling lives. It plays a role in the healthy development of individuals by providing them with tools and skills to become productive members of society. When youth feel connected to school, they are more likely to report better health, above average marks, and engage in fewer risky activities than youth who feel less connected. This connection to school provides a sense of belonging and enables youth to foster relationships with teachers and peers.

Unfortunately, not all students thrive in mainstream schools. Findings divulged that young people today have many temptations and challenges such as violence, drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, and numerous other potential distractions from healthy and productive lifestyles. Poverty, dysfunctional families, housing instabilities, and various forms of abuse are just some of the other crippling issues our youth face on a daily basis. These problems are what lead educators to identify youth as at risk or high risk.

At-risk is a multifaceted label applied to particular youth in any educational setting on a daily basis. When educators use the term at-risk, they are referring to the multitude of issues. Students may also appear lethargic, withdrawn, or sad in addition to the behavioural characteristics. These issues play a major role in the psycho-social development of these students which adds to their characterization of at-risk.

Furthermore, an extension of the label at-risk is high-risk youth who are the at-risk youth disconnected from school, family and community, compounding the risks and challenges of their lives. Research findings suggest education systems previously have forgotten, marginalized, or misrepresented these students, which is why it is essential for

teachers to look at the etiology of a student in order to effectively identify how a risk factor came into existence for each particular child.

When identifying at-risk youth in classrooms, educators are aware students are at risk of not completing high school. The lack of a high school diploma remains a significant predictor of negative outcomes, including future poverty and unemployment. These students are also at risk of being involved in the child welfare system and becoming teen mothers. Research findings also report that youth violence and the corresponding close relationship between youth violence and substance abuse is perhaps one of the deadliest of these at-risk identifications. Less is understood about youth protective factors which appear to help provide youth with the stability and direction needed to avoid unhealthy or risky behaviour. Understanding what prevents these behaviours may provide solutions that are easier to tackle than addressing the large social, environmental, and family problems associated with risk factors that confront them on a daily basis.

Therefore, access to supportive educational programs and having a connection to school are vital protective factors in the lives of youth, particularly those disengaged from home and community. School thus becomes the only safe and stable place. School becomes an environment where trusting and supportive relationships with adults can be created and fostered. School also becomes a place where youth can become connected to other social supports. Additionally, having access and the ability to offer alternative education settings to students provide opportunities for at-risk students to benefit from formal education and to minimize costs and disruptions they pose to mainstream education. Education programs that address the complex social and educational needs of at-risk and high-risk students are

necessary to ensure that students have the appropriate tools and social supports to navigate a smooth transition into adulthood.

Society has a responsibility to youth and to find a way to keep them away from risk factors. At-risk children are more than just a familial and educational problem; they are a societal one. Society has the power to influence the self-worth of a child and how they respond to risk factors. Families, schools, and communities need to provide optimal learning and social environments for youth. Through this collaboration, society can prepare well-adjusted, educated, and responsible youth to step forward when it is their time. Everyone needs to take an active role in order to combat this chronic issue. Educators are encouraged to use the presented handbook as a tool to help them navigate through the numerous student challenges that present themselves in their classrooms. The handbook will present educators with a variety of community resources to access in order to build a bridge between student environments. Educators are also presented with different teaching strategies and interventions in order to create a positive classroom community. Finally, the handbook will also provide teachers with professional development ideas and information on the importance of lifelong learning.

Identifying At-Risk youth: Strategies to help them succeed

Handbook

ABSTRACT

Approximately 30-40% of Canadian children are deemed to be at risk of not completing high school and 1.2 million or 27.6% of Canadian children under the age of 11 can be considered to have emotional, behavioural, social, or academic problems. This handbook encourages educators to try, adapt, and adopt new methodologies in their teaching repertoire. Intervention strategies include physical literacy, adventure-based learning, strengths-based approach, and social justice.

Marie Peters

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Introduction

As we all know, school plays a vital role in helping youth overcome challenges in their life. Access to a supportive educational environment is a protective factor that connects youth to their communities. This resource handbook was developed to support you as a teacher to help identify at-risk students within your school community. Within it you will find information pertaining to risk indicators, what they mean, professional development ideas, evidence-based intervention strategies, school and community supports, and alternative education centers. The goal of this handbook is to provide those working with youth an accessible and relevant tool to apply to their specific classroom and/or school context.

RESEACH DESIGN

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The data collected during analysis allowed for the consideration of stages of youth development. Data collection also enabled the identification of early-risk factors and promotion of protective factors. Prevention strategies and how to facilitate school, family and community involvement were also involved in the analysis stage.

EDUCATION

Education is the primary factor that enables people to lead healthy, fulfilling

lives. It plays a role in the healthy development of individuals by providing them with tools and skills to become productive members of society. When youth feel connected to school, they are more likely to report better health, above average marks, and engage in fewer risky activities than youth who feel less connected. This connection to school provides a sense of belonging and enables youth to foster relationships with teachers and peers.

Unfortunately, not all students thrive in mainstream schools. Young people today have many temptations and challenges such as violence, drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, and numerous other potential distractions from healthy and productive lifestyles. Poverty, dysfunctional families, housing instabilities, and various forms of abuse are just some of the other crippling issues our youth face on a daily basis. These problems are what lead educators to identify youth as at risk or high risk.

At-risk is a multifaceted label applied to particular youth in any educational setting on a daily basis. When educators use the term at-risk, they are referring to the multitude of issues. Students may also appear lethargic, withdrawn, or sad in addition to the behavioural characteristics. These issues play a major role in the psycho-social development of these students which adds to their characterization of at-risk.

Furthermore, an extension of the label at-risk is high-risk youth who are the at-risk youth disconnected from school, family and community, compounding the risks and challenges of their lives. Education systems previously have forgotten, marginalized, or misrepresented these students, which is why it is essential for teachers to look at the etiology of a student in order to effectively identify how a risk factor came into existence for each particular child.

When identifying at-risk youth in classrooms, educators are aware they are at risk of not completing high school. The lack of a high school diploma remains a significant predictor of negative outcomes, including future poverty and unemployment. These students are also at risk of being involved in the child welfare system and becoming teen mothers. Youth violence and the corresponding close relationship between youth violence and substance abuse is perhaps one of the deadliest of these at-risk identifications. Less is understood about youth protective factors which appear to help provide youth with the stability and direction needed to avoid unhealthy or risky behaviour. Understanding what prevents these behaviours may provide solutions that are easier to tackle than addressing the large social, environmental, and family problems associated with risk factors that confront them on a daily basis.

Access to supportive educational programs and having a connection to school are vital protective factors in the lives of youth, particularly those disengaged from home and community. School thus becomes the only safe and stable place. School becomes an environment where trusting and supportive relationships with adults can be created and fostered. School also becomes a place where youth can become connected to other social supports. Additionally, having access and the ability to offer alternative education settings to students provide opportunities for at-risk students to benefit from formal education and to minimize costs and disruptions they pose to mainstream education. Education programs that address the complex social and educational needs of at-risk and high-risk students are necessary to ensure that students have the appropriate tools and social supports to navigate a smooth transition into adulthood.

Society has a responsibility to youth and to find a way to keep them away from risk factors. At-risk children are more than just a familial and educational problem; they are a societal one. Society has the power to influence the self-worth of a child and how they respond to risk factors. Families, schools, and communities need to provide optimal learning and social environments for youth. Through this collaboration, society can prepare well-adjusted, educated, and responsible youth to step forward when it is their time. Everyone needs to take an active role in order to combat this chronic issue.

SOME DEFINITIONS

Youth: A time period best understood as the time from childhood dependence to independent adulthood

Youth At-Risk: Youth who are marginalized, for example as a result of abuse, sexual exploitation, substance use, bullying, discrimination, mental health problems, or street involvement

High Risk Youth: Youth who are at-risk who have disconnected from school, family and community, compounding the risks and challenges in their lives

Interventions: The act or process of an adult in a caretaking role becoming intentionally involved

Protective Factors: Characteristics at biological, psychological, family, and community levels associated with lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduce the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes

Risk Factors: Characteristic at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that precedes and is associated with a higher likelihood of problem outcomes

Behavioural Phenotype: Patterns of behaviour or the specific and characteristic behavioural repertoire displayed by students with certain conditions

Etiology: How a particular problem came into existence

Positive Psychology: Use of effective strength-based interventions enabling individuals and communities to thrive

BACKGROUND

Approximately 20% or one in five of the children and youth in Canada are at risk for developing problems that jeopardize their present and future adjustment. Additionally, 30-40% of Canadian children are deemed to be at risk of not completing high school and 1.2 million or 27.6% of Canadian children under the age of 11 can be considered vulnerable to emotional, behavioural, social, or academic problems. It is also estimated that 30% of 15-20-year old's do not complete school and that more than 70% of Canadians who enter federal prisons are high school dropouts; four out of five have substance abuse problems, and two out of three have mental health issues. Most at-risk students drop out in grade 8. These statistics are frightening and exactly why we need to place intervention programs in early childhood to help increase school completion, decrease teen pregnancy, decrease involvement with the criminal justice system, and increase employment and earnings in adulthood. Educators need to design complex and comprehensive interventions that take into consideration multiple contexts of functioning. Interventions need to focus on factors that lead to problematic functioning alongside strengths within the child and his or her social milieu.

70% of Canadians who enter federal prisons are high school dropouts

Visible minorities, those living in the inner city, and those individuals living in low socioeconomic status have a higher likelihood of experiencing academic failure than those not. Aboriginal children have a lower level of education completion and attainment in virtually all age levels and children in foster care are more likely to have difficulty in school. These at-risk youths also have an eight times higher chance of withdrawing from school than

those living in higher economic status. What these statistics mean is these students require a higher a rate of needing special education services. It also means they have a higher rate of absenteeism and tardiness and are more likely to use substances, be expelled, and are less likely to graduate. Furthermore, their school scores are 15 to 20 percent lower than normal achieving peers, causing them the likelihood of repeating at least one grade.

Additionally, adolescents living in families receiving income assistance tend to have lower cognitive achievement and higher levels of behavioural and emotional problems than do adolescents whose mothers have left assistance or have never been on assistance. Students born to teen mothers tend to have poorer educational outcomes, poorer reading ability and psychological well being, initiate sexual activity early, are likely to be in contact with criminal justice system, and be involved with substance abuse. Young adults with three risk factors have 14 times the odds of ending up on income assistance themselves and for females, 13 times the odds of giving birth during adolescence. This research suggests a cycle and disadvantage for youth at risk. Youths who do not complete high school have difficulty transitioning into adulthood causing them incapable of becoming productive members of our communities and furthering their education. Without high school and further education, the cycle of poverty will continue.

A child's and adolescent's functioning in school is inextricably linked with his or her sense of belonging and connection to the school environment and his or her relationship with peers and teachers within that environment. Access to supportive educational programs and having a connection to school are vital protective factors in lives of youth, particularly those disengaged from home and community.

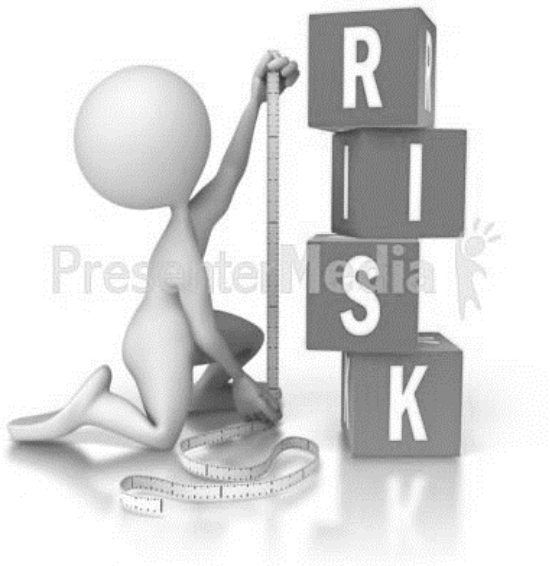
School thus becomes the only place safe and stable for some youth as it provides trusting supportive relationships absent of scrutiny. Due to legal, social, behavioural, emotional, psychological, and instructional challenges, at-risk students change the learning dynamic of our classrooms. Educators and peers struggle to see and understand the variances of learning styles, behaviours, and ambitions of these at-risk students. This lack of understanding causes at-risk students to fear or distrust people in authority and experience a lack of affinity with mainstream school.

Chapter 1: Risk Indicators

There are a variety of risk indicators educators can use to identify at-risk youth in their classrooms. Due to the complexity and diverse nature of individual circumstance, it is important to remember that indicators will vary between individuals. Indicators can present themselves as behavioural, emotional or cognitive, or a combination of all three. If you are wondering if a student fits an at-risk label, you need to ask yourself these questions:

1. Is the student participating academically and socially?
2. Is the student participating in extra curricular activities?
3. Does the student feel connected to the school environment?
4. Is the student taking ownership of their learning?
5. Does the student have positive relationships with staff at the school?
6. Does the student have poor attendance?
7. Does the student appear lethargic at more times than other students?
8. Does the student appear sad and withdrawn?

Asking yourself these questions will force you to observe and reflect upon the behaviours displayed by students. It is only with this awareness, action can be taken.



Young adults with three risk factors have 14 times the odds of ending up on income assistance themselves and for females, 13 times the odds of giving birth during adolescence. This information suggests a cycle and disadvantage for youth at risk. Youths who do not complete high school have difficulty transitioning into adulthood causing them to be incapable of becoming productive members of our communities and to further their education. Without high school and further education, the cycle of poverty will continue.

These indicators also mean that many at-risk youths have little peer or familial support. When a youth is living in a single parent home and is living in low socio-economic status, it means that many times the older sibling takes on extra responsibilities that are normally served by adults such as taking care of younger siblings and obtaining a job to help take care of bills. Indicators also highlight at-risk youth struggle with engaging with school curriculum. This means that students are having difficulty relating to materials presented and possibly the context in which the material is presented. In order for students to gain meaning and purpose from material being taught, they need to be able to relate to it. If you have students who are living with parents who are incarcerated, suffer from substance or physical abuse, who struggle to keep a roof over their families' head and food on the table, the importance and ability to see the meaning of the material being taught is drastically different from those students who are normal achievers.

Another important indicator focuses on being a visible minority and Aboriginal. These students become more susceptible to bullying from peers due to lack of appreciation, lack of understanding of diversity, and also their fear of the unknown school culture into which they are placed

and which they are expected to navigate. In addition to bullying, language and cultural barriers create distance between minority youth and peers almost instantly. These barriers may make them feel they have little or no connection with their community. It also may mean they lack normative skills of language, expression, and comprehension. Minority students have to work harder to learn a new language and culture. It is increasingly difficult if parents do not speak the new language as well because there is little homework support outside of school. Sometimes these students become so desperate to fit in and to be recognized by their peers, they may begin to display negative behaviors both socially, academically, and emotionally. Students may become increasingly agitated, attend school less, choose a less desirable social crowd, begin to experiment with substances, and begin to experience depression.

Table 4.1 outlines risk indicators, what they mean, and ways to protect against risk. It is important to keep in mind that all youth are at-risk at some point by one of the indicators. Youth are affected and react differently to each factor. It is not only important for teachers to be able to identify risk indicators but, it is vital for teachers to know when a student is at-risk and how to address their specific needs. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to be open to educating themselves further and be open to applying new knowledge to their classrooms.

Table 1.1. Risk and Protective Factors for Mental, Emotional, and Behavioural Disorders in Adolescents

Risk Factors	Domain	Meaning	Protective Factors
•Difficult temperament: inflexibility, low positive mood, withdrawal, poor concentration •Low self-esteem, perceived incompetence •Anxiety •Low-level depressive symptoms and dysthymia •Insecure Attachment •Poor social skills, communication and problem-solving skills •Extreme need for approval and social support •Low-self Esteem •Shyness •Emotional problems in childhood •Conduct disorder •Favourable attitude toward substances •Rebelliousness •Early substance abuse •Antisocial behaviour •Head injury •Visible minority •Language and cultural barriers	Individual	•susceptible to bullying •tend to have poorer educational outcomes, poorer reading ability, and psychological well-being •more likely to experience academic failure •8 times higher chance of withdrawing from school •Lower level of educational completion •Higher rate of absenteeism and tardiness •more likely to use substances •more likely to be expelled •less likely to graduate •school scores likely to be 15-20% lower •Likely to repeat at least one grade •Lower cognitive achievement •higher levels of behavioural and emotional difficulties	•Positive physical development •Academic Achievement •High self-esteem •Emotional self-regulation •Good coping skills and problem-solving skills •Engagement and connection in two or more of the following contexts: school, with peers, in athletics, employment, religion, culture
•Parental depression •Parent-child conflict •Poor parenting •Negative Family Environment (may include substance abuse from parent) •Child abuse/maltreatment •Single-parent family •Divorce •Marital conflict •Parent with anxiety •Parental substance abuse •Parental unemployment •Lack of adult supervision •Poor attachment with parents •Sexual abuse •Involved in foster care system	Family		•Family provides structure, limits, rules, monitoring, and predictability •Supportive relationships •Clear expectations
•Urban setting •Poverty •Community/school violence •Traumatic event •Stressful events •Peer rejection •Poor academic achievement •Societal/community norms favour substances	School, neighbourhood, community		•Presence of mentors •Engagement opportunities in school and community •Positive norms •Physical and psychological safety

Source: Youth.GOV (2016) as cited from O'Connell, M. E., Boat, T., & Warner, K. E. (2009).

Chapter 2: Professional Development

Being able to identify at-risk behaviors is only part of the issue in relation to education. Teacher training also has a significant impact on student wellbeing and early detection of risk indicators. Teachers who teach in mainstream and alternative education settings face challenges they are not specifically trained to address. Due to lack of teacher training, knowledge, and time, at-risk students are still taught using uniform teaching or blanket teaching. This uniformity demands that students be able to conform, to compete, to absorb knowledge, and to easily transmit knowledge that is taught. Some teachers also believe at-risk learners are inappropriate role models, display negative peer pressure, and add a bad element to the overall educational environment. It is for reasons such as these teachers should have a higher degree of education and special training. This lack of education and training is one of many reasons our schools are failing these youths, next to funding, staffing, and obtainment of smaller class sizes.

Professional development is an important part of a teacher's job. Communities are constantly changing and so are youth. On the following page two conferences are suggested for professional development opportunities. They are held every year and are accessible to most people as there is a cost involved. Each of the provided conferences has a variety of keynote speaker who share information concerning risk indicators, supports, and strategies. Information on where to access conference details can be

> Who dares to
> TEACH
> must never cease to
> LEARN
>
> -John Cotton Dana

found on the websites provided in the conference description. Individuals are also encouraged to seek out other conferences in their district to help meet the needs of the students in their school community.

Teachers and administrators are also encouraged to conduct their own action research. This is a reflective strategy in which individuals study relevant literature and research to select an approach that may improve current practices they feel are lacking. Other options include reading professional journals and experimenting with new practices in your classroom. It is important to remember that as an educator, it is your responsibility to ensure you are always learning about students and practices in order to be the most inclusive and effective professional possible.

High Risk Youth Conference (HYRC)
www.hryc.ca
The HYRC is offered to all individuals living in Alberta and beyond. Youth also have an opportunity to attend this conference. This conference is recommended because it brings together service providers, researchers, and experts to focus on the growing population of youth with increasingly complex needs. The dynamics, barriers, and issues high-risk youth experience will be addressed such as vulnerable youth, gang involvement, mental illness, addictions, homelessness, and sexually exploited youth. Attendees of this conference can expect to learn about the emerging practices that encompass the knowledge and methodology of harm reduction, attachment theory, trauma, and brain development, relationship-based practice, and resiliency/strength based approaches. Individuals interested in attending this conference are encouraged to go the conference website *www.hyrc.ca* for more information.

Canadian Conference on Promoting Healthy Relationships for Youth
www.learningtoendabuse.ca
Policy makers, researchers, youth advocates, educators, mental health, youth justice, and social service professionals involved in the prevention of relationship violence and promotion of youth well-being in families, schools, and communities are encouraged to attend this conference. Students are also invited to attend. The goal of this conference is to break down the walls between social institutions and youth through the recognition that there are overlapping issues with common health promotion, prevention, early identification, and intervention strategies. Some of the topics to be covered include understanding the intersection between bullying and mental health, promoting well-being among Aboriginal youth through healthy relationships, and trauma informed schools. Individuals interested in attending this conference are encouraged to go the conference webpage www.learningtoendabuse.ca for more information.

Chapter 3: Evidence-based Intervention Strategies

Interventions are vital to the success of at-risk youth and can be described as any planned action to increase some aspect of a student's school experience in response to a persistent and serious problem (DeNafo, 1993; Park & Scott, 2009). If serious behaviour and emotional problems have not been altered by the time students enter secondary school, these behaviours can be considered chronic and interfere with successful school experiences, academic functioning, and positive relationships with peers and teachers (Montague, Enders, Cavendish, & Castro, 2011; Park &Scott, 2009). Grades 7-12 are when most dropout rates occur and secondary school is the last opportunity to attempt to improve the status of at-risk students in schools (Cheng, 1994; DeNafo, 1993; Wotherspoon, 2001). Interventions thus become vital in order to reduce risk factors and ensure that students are awarded the supports and opportunities to overcome challenges in order to achieve success.

In his seminal work, DeNafo (1993) emphasized that behaviours should be targets of intervention for increased academic performance and broke them into three levels. First, individual strategies or special accommodations for individual student needs have to be made. Second, the school needs to come together and focus on a targeted group. Third, youth must have access to their community outside the school environment. In order for intervention models to be successful, it is important

teachers have access to support services, pay attention to parental involvement, introduce peer mentoring, and have small class sizes. Utilizing these strategies will help to build a strong learning environment for students and teachers.

Some research studies have reported that one high school student drops out every 9 seconds (Brownell et al., 2010; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Wotherspoon, 2001). Another study revealed that 1 in 8 children never graduate from high school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Students with disabilities are more likely to drop out than their general education peers (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Dropout rates are disproportionately high for Hispanic, African American, Native American, and low-income backgrounds; students who live in single-parent homes, and those who attend large urban schools (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Park & Scott, 2009). The highest dropout rates include students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Park & Scott, 2009; Theissen, 2006; Wotherspoon, 2001). Without a diploma, the possibility of these students securing employment is increasingly and virtually impossible.

The aforementioned statistics illustrate the magnitude of having unidentified at-risk youth in our classrooms and improper intervention strategies in place. Therefore, the importance of designing interventions which focus on factors that lead to problematic functioning (risk factors) along with strengths within the child and his or her social milieu (protective factors) becomes that much more vital (Schonent-

Key Concerns

- Grades 7-12 are when most dropouts occur
- Every 9 seconds one high school student drops out
- 1 in 8 children never graduate

Reichl, 2008). Educators need to design complex and comprehensive interventions that take into consideration multiple contexts of functioning (family, school, peer group, and community) in order to meet the needs of all students.

Table 3.1 outlines four effective evidence-based intervention strategies that promote active engagement, create equitable learning environments, utilize student background, and encourage student voice and sense of control. A commonality in all of the presented strategies is the teacher's need to be flexible not only in how success and strengths are measured but how accomplishments are measured. Classrooms need to be an environment where all students feel safe, encouraged, and respected by all parties. It is the responsibility of the teacher to create this environment and maintain it while not disrupting the management of the classroom. It is important for readers to note that Table 3.1, applications are not an exhaustive list. Educators are encouraged to try a variety of strategies and share with colleagues to see what has worked and what has not, and how to modify and adapt to meet the needs of students.

Educators need to be willing to explore and apply a variety of strategies to their teaching methodologies to ensure that students receive an equitable education. As educators, we know many at-risk youth struggle to see the relevance of academics; therefore, it is important an inviting classroom is created. Students will be more willing to attend school if they are exposed to a cohesive learning environment based on mutual respect, trust, and safety. Students who normally reject school will also feel encouraged to attend if the classroom environment allows them to have an active role in their learning.

Applying both social justice and strength-based (SB) approaches allows students to become decision makers through negotiation and consultation. These approaches also allow students to share their voice and demonstrate their knowledge of expertise. Adopting these methods permits students to form relationships with their school, peers, and community while increasing self-efficacy, tolerance, and motivation. SB and social justice can be applied as cohesive units. Students who already feel disenfranchised from school are able to feel power and ownership of their learning. Additionally, exposure to learning through physical engagement is also highly beneficial. This form of learning forces students to cooperate with others, challenge their thinking and planning skills, observe, and be resourceful, persistent, and adaptable. Adding physical components to education allows students to explore their leadership skills, self-concept, and interpersonal skills. Physical components then become more than just a physical activity. This then becomes a method of therapy that encourages students to explore and challenge themselves while learning new applicable skills for their daily challenges.

How do you measure student strengths and success??

When using any of the suggested approaches, mentoring becomes a factor in student learning. Mentoring has a significant role in all forms of education as it focuses on the social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development of students. When students feel they have a supportive adult they trust, they are more likely to be successful in academics but also in their ability to complete high school and to attend college. Not only do youth feel more encouraged to try activities outside of their physical and mental comfort zone, youth choose more

positive behaviours and feel more confident in making better life choices.

The approaches suggested for this handbook encourage educators to experiment with their methods of teaching. As teachers take the time to further educate themselves using different learning approaches, education will become more student-centered. The self-confidence of all members involved in a democratic educational environment will also increase. Students will feel their contribution and voice are heard and teachers will have the opportunity to make a significant difference in student lives.

Table 3.1. Evidence-Based Teaching Strategies

Physical and Adventure-based Learning	• This is the purposeful use of activities for social and personal development • Activities are encouraged one full day a week in addition to a weekly activity where youth are engaging with their community
Key Benefits	• Environment is designed for students to have positive learning experience in a therapeutic environment • Physical training that increases physical fitness can be a core intervention • Physical and psychological benefits • Teaches students responsibility, goal-setting, and self-worth • Provides structure and discipline • Promotes skilled learning and accountability • Promotes self-confidence • Students do not feel restricted by it • Simultaneously interact with community • Promotes communication, team-building, and social skills
Application	• Larger scale activities such as full day canoeing or hiking excursions • Other physical activities can include skating, skiing, rock climbing, camping, or a ropes challenge course
Strength-based Approach	• Focuses on creating an optimal learning environment for all students including those who are struggling academically, behaviourally, and emotionally • Challenges deficit-based perspectives and enacts on equitable schooling practices toward students experiencing social and educational marginalization
Key Benefits	• Youth are meant to be fully involved in their learning which allows them to have power and break down barriers they are facing both academically and socially through social justice due to the belief by some, that at-risk learners pose dangers to other learners • Emphasizes the positive aspects of student effort and achievement as well as human strengths • Educators are offered a potentially rich and varied landscape from which to engage the strengths of youth • Emphasizes accessing student knowledge • Educators can change their literacy curriculum by drawing on student interests and popular culture • Allows teachers to develop a new perspective and appreciation for the knowledge and strengths students bring with them to class • New teaching and learning opportunities are created through mutual understanding and respect
Application	• Educators simply need to use positive psychology, focus on positive youth development, explore the socio-cultural approaches to teaching, and look to their community for additional support • Take time to learn student strengths to gain a better understanding of them

	• Nurture student strengths • Structure lessons that enable all students to use their strength first and use it to motivate them to learn new concepts (use their strength to capture their attention which leads to motivation) • Reward students for their contributions • Keep an inventory of strengths and pass them along to other teachers • Offer public verbal praise
Social Justice	• A way to relate material to students • Purpose of connecting student lives to society
Key Benefits	• Educators can reinforce the SB approach goals which are school engagement, empowerment, and educational change • Teaching is directed toward individual students and helping to guide students through their own social contexts as they navigate through the education system. • Allows them to feel in control and that they have a meaningful contribution to their learning • Creates a stigma-free environment
Application	• Flexibility, ability to rethink approaches, and use a broad range of pedagogical strategies • Work to earn student trust • Involve students in attainable goal setting • Allow students to have a voice in assignment selection or presentation • Have a daily circle where students are encouraged to share their comments, questions, or concerns • Provide students with opportunities to help make change through their community • Provide students with opportunities to engage and develop relationships with other adults through after school or community programs

Chapter 4: School Supports

School supports can be an underutilized tool in the learning environment. This section aims to provide readers with a brief overview of the role and benefit that support staff offer for students and teachers. Librarians, counsellors, psychologists, nurses, teacher aides, and youth workers are just some of the school supports who exist. It is important to be aware that not all schools have these supports directly on site, but they are still accessible within districts and communities.

School supports provide a wide variety of instructional methods, educational services, school services, and community resources. By accessing extra support, teachers facilitate student access to greater variety of educational strategies and create support programs which they would be unable to do alone. Specific support can be given based on individual student needs in regards to educational achievement, aspirations, and attainment of goals.

These support services work together with class teachers and school administration with the goal of determining the proper steps and referrals to make for each individual student. This additional help has a goal of increasing student engagement, motivation, and self-esteem. Personalization lets students know that they are cared for and that there are people who will advocate for them. Students are able to access curriculum in a way that works for them and students and teachers alike develop respect for difference.

Table 4.1. Accessible School Supports

Support	Who are they?	Services
Librarian	Librarians are fantastic instructional partners. They are information specialists. Libraries encourage curiosity.	• Can assist both students and class teachers in selecting appropriate and interesting reading material • Have flexible schedules and are available to help students with school work • Develop a resource base reflective of district curriculum and student interest
School Counsellor	School counsellors have a lot of specialized training as they are able to provide a safe and unbiased listening ear.	• Provide students with advice on issues students are dealing with inside and outside of school • Provide students with coping skills to help manage any emotional, behavioral, or social problems students are having • Provide parents with references to outside treatment centers for substance abuse, professional therapists, or health clinics • Provide assistance with parent-teacher meetings • Provide information for community prevention and intervention programs • Provide students with effective communication skills to use for classroom, home, and social purposes • Serve as a student advocate
School Psychologist	School psychologists are experts in mental health, learning, and behaviour. Their participation in schools helps to provide direct support and interventions to students.	• Help identify at-risk students and school vulnerabilities • Enhance staff understanding and responsiveness to diverse cultures and backgrounds • Help students transition between school and community learning environments, such as residential treatment centers and juvenile justice programs • Conduct psychological and academic testing • Help manage student and class behaviour • Collect and interpret student and classroom data • Reduce inappropriate referrals to special education • Assess student emotional and behavioural needs • Make referrals to and help coordinate community services provided in schools • Help families understand their child's learning and mental health needs • Collaborate with teachers as well as other mental health professionals such as school

		counsellors, public health nurses, and social workers
Teacher Aide	Teacher aides play a critical role in the school environment. They can work with individual students or small groups. They help teachers.	• Collect student data • Implement special programming and report to teachers and families • Attend planning and programming meetings • Implement health care routines for child
Youth Worker	Youth workers are beneficial in the guidance and support of youth involved in schools. They aid in the personal, social, and educational development of students in the following ways:	• Assessing the needs of young people • Plan and deliver programming • Run arts-based activities, community projects, and outdoor education • Befriend youth in different settings including outreach work • Mentor, coach, and support individuals • Work with partnerships with other professionals from other organizations that support youth such as social care, local authorities, and education • Work with parents, schools, and communities to support and improve services to youth
Social Worker	Social workers employed by the school district have a specialized area of practice. They can help teachers and students by applying their unique knowledge and skills in the following areas:	• Student mental health concerns • Student behavioral concerns • Provide positive behavior support • Consult with teachers and parents • Provide individual and group counselling • Facilitate community supports with parents and students • Provide crisis interventions, conflict resolution • Help students with social, emotional, and life adjustments • Mobilize community resources
Public Health Nurse	Registered public nurse. Health is related to ability to learn. Many are mobile and schools can arrange a specific day(s) of the week for them to be available students for questions and/or needs.	• Nurses can provide information regarding sexual health • Facilitate school programming • Provide health and nutrition information • Have training to spot signs of child abuse and bullying • Are able to address sensitive and personal health issues • Intervene and help at-risk students • Referrals • Rehabilitation • Post-rehabilitation support • Provide staff wellness workshops

Chapter 5: Alternative Education Centers

Not all students thrive in mainstream schools. It is important for educators to be aware of alternative education programs available in their communities as well as those in neighbouring communities. This knowledge helps to refer students to a centre that will be the most effective for addressing specific challenges. This section explains why alternative education works and is an appropriate form of education. A brief overview of two alternative education centres will be provided. Readers are encouraged to take the initiative to further search the information provided but to also look beyond that information for additional alternatives accessible in their community.

There are a variety of needs that cannot be met within mainstream educational environments. Many at-risk students become disengaged and disconnected to their learning environments due to overwhelming feelings of failure due to their personal experiences outside of school as well as their academic experiences inside school. These debilitating emotions can lead to low self-esteem and low self-worth. Additionally, feelings of being left behind or forgotten are common for at-risk students. For reasons such as these, members of the educational team must be able to identify when a child is at-risk. The school-based team also needs to be willing to acknowledge when their school supports for individual students have been exhausted and seek out alternate education programming.

It is important to keep in mind a referral from administration, a school counselor, a social worker, and in some cases, a psychiatrist or mental health team will be required when seeking outside placement for a student. Reaching out to

alternative education programs allows at-risk students to experience programming that is specifically designed for them. Students referred to these programs present a variety of difficulties behaviourally, socially, and personally that are affecting their learning. Alternative programs provide services schools cannot, as they provide specialized services designed to meet students' individual needs.

Alternative education programs are not only a place of learning but they often become a place of refuge. Depending on the type of center the student is referred, access to food, shelter, community supports, hygiene materials, health care, and clothing can be provided. Alternative programs also can help with reconnecting students to their community as students' relationship to school is rekindled. These programs work for at-risk students because of their unconventional learning environment and flexibility. Participant level varies in these programs due to the variety of challenges with which students are dealing. These difficulties can include any combination of substance abuse, emotional and behavioural difficulties, gang involvement, parole conditions, and prostitution. These programs are able to provide a variety of therapeutic services in one space that at-risk require in order to reform.

There are a diverse range of alternative education programs in each community. The two programs suggested in Table 5.1 are outdoor therapeutic approaches combined with individualized therapies and academics. These programs are only a sample of the available alternative education programs for at-risk students in BC. It is important for educators to seek out what is available in their community in order to refer students to a center that will meet their specific needs.

Table 5.1. Alternative Education Centers

Venture Academy www.ventureacademy.ca	Venture Academy is a treatment facility for Canadian troubled teens. It has three locations in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario which are classified as residential treatment programs. When a 30-day assessment has been completed by a multidisciplinary team, an individualized Therapeutic Treatment Plan will be created. Individuals will be provided with academic support and clinical treatment. Direct support from a Behavioural Therapist or Counsellor will be provided in various settings such as the classroom, social learning environment, and during recreational activities. Fitness is incorporated into the plan as it is an important part of mental health. Students will get to experience a variety of activities such as swimming, paddle boarding, hiking, skiing, and snowshoeing.
Take a Hike Foundation www.takeahikefoundation.org	The Take a Hike Foundation is an alternative education program for at-risk youth in Grades 10 to 12. Through adventure-based learning, academics, therapy, and community involvement, students are able to address an eclectic array of challenges prevalent in their daily lives. There are three locations in British Columbia: in Vancouver, Burnaby and West Kootenay. A multi pronged approach is applied in this program as teachers, clinical therapists, youth and family workers, and adventure-based specialists all play a pivotal role. Students are exposed to weekly trips as well as multi day expeditions where a full time clinical therapist joins in order to provide support in an alternative setting. Students are also involved in weekly community service activities to help develop and/or mend a connection to their community.

Chapter 6: Community Supports

Due to the multitude of challenges at-risk students experience, it is important teachers are aware available community supports. These supports allow students to develop relationships with other members of the community. With help, students are able to branch out to a variety of organizations to help them meet their daily needs and challenges. Through the development of trusting relationships, students are able to meet more individuals who are willing to advocate for them. The supports shared in Table 4.5 are accessible in most communities and provide youth with services specific to their needs such as housing, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, escaping abuse, medical help, suicide prevention, and accessing food. Educators are encouraged to make themselves familiar with the support services listed but also with other services which their community provides.

Table 6.1. Community Support Services

Organization	Support Provided
NOW Canada Society www.nowcanada.ca	Programs and services for women and youth who have experienced addictions, abuse, sexual exploitation, and mental health challenges. They provide: •Emergency shelter •Transitional housing •Affordable independent living •Variety of programs to help make lifestyle change: • Peer mentoring program • Ongoing assistance • Client initiated programming • Drug screening • On-going access to a variety of therapies • Support in meetings with Ministry of Children and Family Development, court appearances, and probation
Big Brothers and Big Sisters www.bigbrothersbigsisters.ca	This is a charity that focuses on children through mentoring programs to enhance youth self-esteem and to provide them with opportunity. Mentoring programs include: • One-to-one and group • Outside and inside school • Couples for kids • Teen mentoring • Between Generations • Kids N Kops • Dream Catcher Mentoring • Staying in school and respect • Trust, empowerment, sense of community, friendship, and confidence
Elizabeth Fry Society www.elizabethfry.com	•Supports those affected by sexual abuse, exploitation, or violence in a relationship •Move low income women out of poverty •Justice services for women •Advocate for women, children, youth, and families •Counselling services, educational, social, and legal support programs •Child and youth programs
John Howard Society www.johnhoward.ca	•Non-profit charitable organization •Assist families who have come into or who are at-risk of conflict with law •Intervention services •Prevention services •Advocacy and public education •Emergency shelter for both male and female •Help provide direct access to housing (homeless or at risk of becoming homeless)

	•Variety of addictions recovery programs
YMCA www.ymca.ca	•Employment resource center, especially for youth •Employment programs •Job search and skills development programs •Mentorship and apprenticeship information •Immigration services •Child and family development •Youth services •Social activities •Housing services
Salvation Army www.salvationarmy.ca	Individuals can meet with a case worker and a partner to assess needs and community supports available such as: • Food assistance • Clothing and basic housing essentials • Backpack program and Christmas hampers (seasonal)
Crisis Line 1.888.353.2273	Schools are encouraged to talk about this line with students and post information in visible areas for students to access. This line provides access to help for mental health concerns such as suicide. • Provide callers with referrals to community and/or professional services • Can intervene in emergency or life-threatening situations

Summary

- Approximately 30-40% of Canadian children are deemed to be at risk of not completing high school and 1.2 million or 27.6% of Canadian children under the age of 11 can be considered vulnerable to emotional, behavioural, social, or academic problems
- Grades 7-12 are when most drop-outs occur
- Every nine seconds one high school student drops out
- One in eight children never graduate
- All students will become at-risk by one of the indicators at some point in their school career
- Risk factors can include family dynamics, community dynamics, personal/peer relationships, or school
- Indicators can present themselves in behavioural, emotional or cognitive, or a combination of all three
- Young adults with three risk factors have 14 times the odds of ending up on income assistance
- Female youth with three risk factors have 13 times the odds of ending up giving birth during adolescence
- Educators need to design complex and comprehensive interventions that take into consideration multiple contexts of functioning (family, school, peer group, and community) in order to meet the needs of all students
- In order for students to achieve success and want to achieve success, it is crucial teachers create an effective learning environment
- Teachers must want to create a classroom climate that demonstrates the professional knowledge of the teacher, as well as teacher morality and personality
- Teachers who take the time to educate themselves with the lives of their students will help to create understanding which enhances student and teacher relationships
- Implementing intervention programs at an earlier age than secondary school allows for a stronger rate of positive impact
- Highly effective programs are those that have individualized programming, peer tutoring,

teacher aides, after school and summer programs, flexible schedules, parental involvement, and holistic or multi faceted approach to intervention

- Active engagement and adventure-based learning helps to promote skilled learning, responsibility, and accountability for behavior as well as goal-setting, planning, and positive lifestyle changes

- Physical elements provide at-risk with more energy, more discipline, and self-confidence to commit to other interventions by undergoing the physical training process

- Physical learning allows at-risk youth to socialize beyond their family boundaries and make new and meaningful relationships

- A SB approach challenges deficit-based perspectives and acts upon equitable schooling practices toward students experiencing social and educational marginalization

- Youth involved in a SB approach are meant to be fully involved in their learning, which allows them to have power to break down academic and social barriers enacted by the erroneous belief that at-risk learners pose dangers to other learners

- A social justice approach allows educators to reinforce SB approach goals which are school engagement, empowerment, and educational change

- Being able to identify at-risk behaviors is only part of the issue in relation to education

- Teacher training also has a significant impact on student wellbeing and early detection of risk indicators

- Having access and the ability to offer alternative education settings to students provide opportunities for at-risk students to benefit from formal education and to minimize costs and disruptions they pose to mainstream education

Conclusion

This handbook has been created with the intention of assisting educators and school communities by supporting youth as they experience multidimensional challenges academically, socially, and personally. This handbook presents users with evidence-based practices that can be easily applied and incorporated into any school environment. Strategies presented in this handbook incorporate individual student strengths and offer interventions which challenge students to overcome obstacles through the development of self-esteem and self-worth, while simultaneously creating positive connections with school, community, peers, and teachers.

Educators are encouraged to seek and access professional development opportunities and share their new knowledge with colleagues. Educators are also persuaded to utilize school and community supports to ensure that their needs and the needs of their students are met.

The strategies shared in this handbook aid in the creation of classroom communities where students are able to feel safe, respected, and successful. If this is done effectively, more student needs can be met and the cycle of disadvantage can stop.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind ethical considerations when working with youth, especially those at-risk. Students can sometimes misinterpret caring and attention for something more. Educators need to set personal limits between themselves and students to avoid the development of potentially unhealthy relationships. It is for reasons such as this, it is important to have a school community where students have access to more than

one adult for advocacy, support, and encouragement.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As educators, it is important to reflect upon our roles. Ethics thus become an important part of daily practice as challenges and dilemmas arise. Campbell (2008) stated

> nearly everything a teacher does while in contact with students carries moral weight. Every response to a question, every assignment handed out, every discussion on issues, every resolution of a dispute, every grade given to a student carries with it the moral character of the teacher. (p. 364)

It is with this knowledge educators need to reflect upon the decisions and judgements they make when dealing with challenging behaviours and choices affecting the classroom community. Consequently, teaching becomes a moral activity (Campbell, 2008; Christenbury, 2008; Mostert, 2004). Teachers are role models and they need to be fair in dealing with student conduct and consequences.

Educators have a tremendous amount of power (Christenbury, 2008). Teachers have the ability to do good but need to also remember they can do harm (Campbell, 2008; Christenbury, 2008). The classroom community needs to be a place where fairness to all students is awarded. It also needs to be a place where vulnerable students are protected and their right to privacy is handled delicately. Most importantly, when working with any student, setting personal limits between ourselves and students is vital, especially those who are vulnerable (Christenbury, 2008). It is through personal experience teaching at-risk students, caring and attention can be misinterpreted in an unhealthy manner. Students may begin to see you as a friend and begin or try to cross teacher-student boundaries. It is for such reasons that it is important to have a school community where students have access to more than one adult for advocacy, support, and encouragement.

Social justice also becomes an element of ethics (Campbell, 2008; Christenbury, 2008). Teaching becomes more than about education as it spills into the outside lives of students. Virtually all acts of writing, language, and literature we expose students to involves choices of right and wrong (Christenbury, 2008). The manner in which we teach students to question what they are learning, the language they are using, and how they are taught to critically analyze what they are reading, influences how they interpret their global community outside of the classroom. Thus, this becomes the ethical challenge of educators (Christenbury, 2008). Everything we teach and how we teach has a profound consequence for ourselves and our society.

Due to the ethical weight as an educator, Mostert (2004) strongly encouraged reflective practice regarding appropriate behaviour and collaborative standards. Teachers have an ethical responsibility to take advantage of professional development opportunities in order to ensure they are staying relevant with changing education policies, community challenges, available interventions strategies, and alternative education options (Mostert, 2004). Educators also have an ethical obligation regarding student confidentiality and privacy. It is important that when handling sensitive information educators seek additional help if they fear the safety of a student is in danger. Finally, Mostert (2004) mentions educators have an ethical duty to ensure assessments and interventions are fair, valuable, reliable, and effective in the evaluation of student achievement. Teachers need to be willing to reflect upon the use of assessment tools and how they measure strengths and successes. It is through the skilled ability to reflect, more effective decision making can be made for the benefit of all those involved in the classroom community.

All matters of ethics are directly related to the teaching methods and intervention strategies used to create classroom communities. Incorporating social justice in the classroom allows students to have their voice heard. It also allows them to feel that they have control in their learning and that they are valuable contributors to the educational environment. Applying a strengths-based approach allows all students to enter the class with success. This application automatically creates equality among students, increases self-esteem, increases self-worth, and the appreciation of peer strengths. Experimenting with new strategies to ensure all students are receiving an equitable education and that all students are engaged increases the likelihood students will feel encouraged to stay in school. Finally, the issue of ethics also relates to teachers recognizing when an educational environment is not working for a student. Teachers are obligated to be aware of alternative education centers and other support services available to students. This ensures all student needs are being met. When teachers are empowered with increased knowledge through professional development, they are better equipped to provide vulnerable students the supports and opportunities they require. Therefore, it is recommended teachers and school administrators promote active participation in learning opportunities. Research also supports intervention strategies that foster the creation of classroom communities. Student interests and strengths need to be aligned with their educational needs. Thus, educators are encouraged to experiment with a variety of teaching strategies that include student voice, different methods of instruction to foster student participation, and student strengths. Consequently, the formation of supportive classroom communities will enable students to learn in a safe environment where their self-esteem and self-worth are protected.

Additionally, research recommends that educators participate in the collegial process of sharing student information such as risk factors, triggers, effective interventions, strengths of students, and additional areas students require support. This strategy may help in the transitional phases of students as they move from classroom to classroom during the day and progress grade levels. This type of sharing may also aid outside supports working with individual students by providing a larger picture of how the student is interacting in various environments. This information is helpful to all those working with students as intervention strategies are developed and applied.

Take Away

My reasoning for this project was both professional and personal. Professionally, I have the academic background that awards me the opportunity of teaching students. What this background did not provide me was the awareness that I would have at-risk students in my classrooms. I did not know who at-risk students were, what that meant, or how to identify them. It also meant that I did not know where to go for support within the school or within the community. I also did not have a clear understanding of how to deal with student challenges whether they were mental, behavioural, physical, emotional, or social. Additionally, I did not have a clear understanding of what my responsibility was to these at-risk youths or the steps I needed to take in order to ensure their safety inside and outside of the school environment was protected.

On a personal level, working in the inner city brought to light a plethora of challenges students were forced to deal with in their everyday lives that I did not even think was possible. Knowing that I had students who were homeless, involved in gangs and prostitution, suffered from substance abuse and mental illness, had parents who were

incarcerated and the student themselves had experience with incarceration was overwhelming. It was also the realization that my own daughter had become at-risk as she expressed feelings of not living anymore due to the bullying she experienced on a daily basis at school. The exposure to these experiences are what pushed me to pursue a master's degree in special education. I knew that I needed to learn more about teaching, the students, different methodologies, and tools that I could use in my own practice.

The research conducted in this project exposed me to startling statistics and challenges that will forever shape the way I view the students who enter my classroom. This project exposed me to a variety of interventions that I believe in and support such as incorporating social justice, a strengths-based approach, and applying adventure-based learning in the routine of the class. This research also encouraged me to define the roles of others within the school system such as counsellors, librarians, and teacher's aides. I too felt that I needed to take the initiative and discover what alternative education centers were available in addition to community supports.

Overall, my take away from this project is that I need to continue to educate myself in order to be effective for my students and for my own children. I learned that it is important to seek additional help, to listen to students, to observe, and to take action. I have learned that my ethical responsibility as a teacher is more than to educate but to also ensure that the overall well-being of students is cherished, respected, guarded, and promoted. It is for these reasons, that I realize that to be an educator, I also need to involve myself in life long learning opportunities which is something this project awarded me.

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